Archaeology of the Phoenix Indian School

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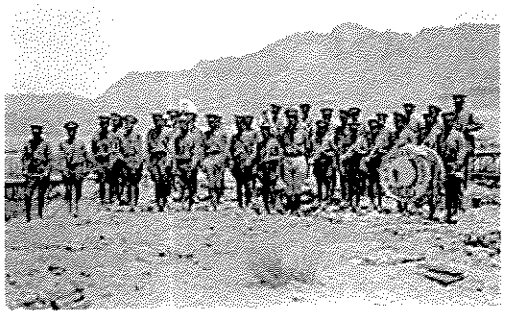
by Owen Lindauer

"It's cheaper to educate Indians than to kill them."
--Indian Commissioner Thomas Morgan speaking at the establishment of the Phoenix Indian School in 1891

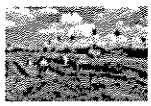


The Phoenix Indian School was part of the Federal government's policy of forced assimilation in which Indian children were to be transformed into Americans along Anglo-Saxon lines. Left, the school's band at Navajo Bridge, ca. 1930. (Courtesy Bureau of Indian Affairs)

Once Native Americans were confined to reservations in the 1880s, the federal government embarked on a plan to bring about their disappearance--not by military means, but by assimilating their children through education. Our investigations at the off-reservation boarding school in Phoenix have yielded subtle archaeological evidence that--along with early records of the school (including its newspaper), biographical accounts of employees and students, and historical records of school life--documents the students' reactions to this attempt to suppress their tribal traditions and identities. The evidence suggests that the need to get along with Indians of different tribes as well as non-Indians, the knowledge that the federal government treated them unlike other people, and the alienation some felt when they returned home fostered a new, pan-Indian identity.

Founded in 1891, the United States Industrial Indian School at Phoenix, later known as the Phoenix Indian School, was a coeducational, federal institution for American Indian primary and secondary students. The school temporarily operated out of the West End Hotel, but in April 1891 a 160-acre property was acquired with money from both the federal government and a group of Phoenix businessmen, and in June 1892 a main school building was completed. By 1900, enrollment had grown from 42 to 698 students from 23 tribes in Arizona, New Mexico, California, Nevada, and Oregon. The campus had 14 brick and 20 frame buildings, including a large schoolhouse, a two-story building containing employee quarters and a student dining hall, a large six-room shop for vocational training, several dormitories, a water and sewer system, a bathhouse, and a boiler house. There were 240 acres of fields, where hay and garden crops (turnips, cabbages, tomatoes, and melons) were cultivated. Horses, mules, cattle, pigs, ducks, turkeys, and chickens were raised to contribute to the vocational education of the students and the school's self-sufficiency.

As the government built more reservation schools, the value of Phoenix Indian School land became greater than the benefits of running the school. An act of Congress, signed by President Reagan in November 1988, closed the school and passed its administration from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the National Park Service. Part of the school's property was transfered to Barron-Collier Companies, a Florida land developer, in return for 108,000 acres of land it owned, which was added to Big Cypress National Preserve and Panther National Wildlife Reserve in Florida. Barron-Collier also established a $35 million trust fund for the education of Indian children in Arizona.



The Track Site, a turn-of-the-century dump at Phoenix Indian School, at the start of excavations in 1995 (left) [LARGER IMAGE] A large circular pit (feature 24) during excavation. Two articulated cow skeletons, perhaps animals that had died and were buried quickly, were found at the base of the pit beneath a thick layer of ceramic, glass, and metal artifacts (right) [LARGER IMAGE] (Owen Lindauer)

Laws require that when the federal government exchanges land, archaeological sites be evaluated and, if determined to be significant, they usually must be excavated. The Phoenix Indian School Archaeological Project was initiated to assess a large turn-of-the-century trash dump near the school's track. The dump's size, 230 by 165 feet, made complete excavation impractical. We conducted small-scale excavations across

the site, sampling about nine percent of the area and recovering about 160,000 items. Bottles, plates with makers' marks, bricks, and coins date the refuse to between 1891 and about 1926. The artifacts thus provide valuable information about the school's first decades.

The Phoenix Indian School was an instrument of the federal government's Indian policy, which can best be described as Anglo-conformity. It was the mission of boarding schools to teach new and different values and customs, many of which, such as religion, conflicted with what Indian children's parents had taught them. English language, English institutions, and English-oriented cultural patterns were emphasized to transform pupils into Americans along Anglo-Saxon lines and to deny their history, language, and culture. Many students were forcibly separated from their parents, and the rapid personal transformation demanded of pupils was facilitated through a draconian and abrupt detachment from tribal cultural patterns.


Student soldiers at the Phoenix Indian School ca. 1930 (Courtesy Bureau of Indian Affairs) [LARGER IMAGE]

A multitude of rules controlled every aspect of daily life. Military discipline was imposed, with boys and girls organized into armylike units and drilled in elaborate marching routines (a practice that continued into the 1930s). In 1897, school superintendent Harwood Hall wrote to the commissioner of Indian affairs,

Too much praise can not be given to the merits of military organization, drill and routine in connection with the discipline of the school; every good end is obtained thereby. It teaches patriotism, obedience, courage, courtesy, promptness, and consistency; besides, in my opinion, it outranks any other plan or system in producing and developing every good moral, mental, and physical quality of the pupil.

Wearing school clothing and marching uniforms was mandatory, and we found evidence of the use of clothing to impose conformity and military discipline on the students in the form of brass buttons from uniforms and glass buttons from shirts, dresses, and undergarments. The introduction of school clothing to pupils on their arrival was traumatic, as their traditional clothing, seen as a shell of savagery by the school officials, was literally cast off. Initially, resistance was expressed emotionally as sorrow and depression, quickly followed by distrust of school authority. Robert Lewis described the experience of leaving home in his graduation speech, published in the 1905 issue of the *Native American,* the Phoenix Indian School newspaper:

The boy is filled with sorrow, to think he can no longer enjoy the freedom of his home, and live with those he loves. He must soon be placed in the care of the pale-face, whom he can not fully trust. He can no longer listen to his father's stories and legends of the past. The feathers and paint, with which he loves to ornament himself, must be renounced.



Apache children on arrival at the Carlisle Indian School (Pennsylvania) wearing traditional clothing and in school garb four months later. Uniforms were the first step in the transformation of Indian children at Carlisle, Phoenix, and other boarding schools [LARGER IMAGE (left)] [LARGER IMAGE (right)] (Photographs by U.S. Army Signal Corps, Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Foundation)

Upon leaving the school, the pupil, dressed in school clothing, went back to the reservation, where another emotionally charged scene was played out. After years of conforming to school rules and customs, failure to cast off the clothing of white society in favor of traditional tribal attire marked a change in self-perception that confirmed both outward and inward conformity to at least some school ways. Helen Sekaquaptewa described her return to the Hopi Mesas from the Phoenix Indian School in 1918:

I didn't feel at ease in the home of my parents now. My father and my mother, my sister and my older brother told me to take off those clothes and wear Hopi attire...I didn't wear them...My mother said she was glad I was home. If I would stay there, she would not urge me to change my ways. I could wear any kind of clothes that I wanted to wear if I would just stay at home with her.

Another tool of assimilation at the Phoenix school was a steam whistle, which signified order and discipline, as well as efficiency, thriftiness, and punctuality. The whistle also introduced the concept of clock time, the

division of the day into regularly spaced units. Seconds, minutes, and hours instilled the order and predictability required to schedule and manage hundreds of students. On the reservation natural time divided the day into fewer, repeating units such as sunrise, sun-over-head, and sunset, and longer-term units equivalent to days (sleeps) or months (moons). This perception of time accommodated the demands of important schedules for traditional ceremonies, planting, and hunting. The numerous and precise divisions of clock time and the many obligations to meet daily schedules radically contrasted with the concept of natural time and the obligations of reservation life. The steam whistle notified students of times for various activities. Whistle blasts sounded at 6:00 for rising, 8:00 to mark the beginning of school and work, 12:00 for lunch, 1:15 to return to work, and 5:15 to mark the end of the workday. Bells and bugle calls were also used. At the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma, 22 bugle calls governed the daily routine. Bugles were used at the Phoenix Indian School early on, but were replaced by the whistle in 1909. The whistle was finally silenced in 1963 with the closing of the old campus power plant.

Steam whistles, like this one found during the Track Site excavations, regimented the daily routine at the Phoenix Indian School (Owen Lindauer) [LARGER IMAGE]

One of the most unusual experiences confronting the pupils was that of the dining hall, to which the whistle summoned them three times each day. Not only was the food served in the dining hall different from home, but it is probably safe to assume that most pupils had never used dishes or utensils before they came to the Phoenix Indian School. On the reservation food was often eaten in a family setting, sitting around a hearth and, probably using hands, sharing from a communal vessel. This image contrasts with one of row after row of dining tables set with plates and utensils, each pupil in his or her assigned place.

The dining hall at Phoenix Indian School was an important stage for learning Anglo ways and breaking traditional ones. The dining hall ca. 1904 (left) (Courtesy Arizona Historical Society) [LARGER IMAGE] Marker's mark on a ceramic fragment from the Track Site (right) [LARGER IMAGE] (Owen Lindauer)

As the school's original name indicates, one of its primary goals was to train Indian youth in productive trades. Young men worked and learned in a variety of shops on campus (wagon making, shoemaking, harness making, blacksmithing, carpentry, tin working, cabinetmaking), as well as in the school's bakery and on its farm, which included a dairy. The education of girls focused on training for the household (sewing, cooking, and laundry). The girls worked with the school's doctor in providing care in the campus hospital and later in a tuberculosis sanitarium a mile from campus. For girls, caring for one's doll (baby) was a way of introducing socialization skills and gender-role identification at an early age. We recovered 136 fragments from 108 dolls.

Porcelain doll's head found at the Track Site (Owen Lindauer) [LARGER IMAGE]

Assimilation policy included the development of individual identity and initiative and the dramatic alteration of traditional concepts of wealth and individual economic responsibility to kin and society. In 1888 John Oberly, superintendent of Indian schools, argued that the objective of the schools was to wean the student from the tribal system and to imbue him with the egotism of American civilization, so that he would say "I" instead of "we," and "this is mine," instead of "this is ours." If Indians could appreciate tangible wealth, they could be encouraged to pursue its accumulation. Respect for and recognition of the importance of private property and wealth were integral parts of the lesson of self-reliance. "I had to earn all of my spending money and my hands were never still," wrote Helen Sekaquaptewa in her journal. "I was always doing embroidery or crochet or tatting, making things to sell."

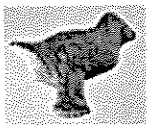
Teaching vocational skills for young men, here at work in the school's bakery (left) [LARGER IMAGE], and domestic skills for young women, here in a sewing class (right) [LARGER IMAGE] was one of the Phoenix Indian School's main goals. (left, Bureau of Indian Affairs; right, courtesy Salt River Project Research Archives, Phoenix)

Some of the comb and toothbrush handles we found are marked with names or symbols that reflect the concept of individual ownership. Education in dental hygiene and the dangers of transmitting germs would have encouraged pupils to mark their own toothbrushes clearly, but the toothbrushes we recovered were either boldly marked with names in ink or were engraved or scratched with names that were barely visible. If the number of marked handles is a measure of the success of teaching individualism, the lesson was not learned by many: only six percent of the toothbrushes and 12 percent of the combs had markings. That some pupils chose to mark items with dates or a simple line rather than an American name reflects the Indian belief that a name is personal and secret and not to be told. In 1928 teacher Katie Pierson noted in her journal that pupils should be asked "How you are called?" rather than "What is your name?"

Comb handle found at the Track Site with an inscription signifying ownership. Only nine of 78 combs recovered had such markings. (Owen Lindauer) [LARGER IMAGE]

Phoenix Indian School pupils were required to attend Sunday school and services off campus and to perform church-related service. Students who did not attend church were punished. In 1934, religious freedom was established and compulsory attendance of religious services was eliminated in 1934 according to federal policy, but in practice punishment for not attending church continued through the 1960s. It was probably possible to practice many Native American religious behaviors such as making prayers of thanks or performing purification rituals in privacy on campus. Katie Pierson recalled that on Saturdays and evenings boys sometimes sneaked off campus to a grove of cottonwoods to practice Indian dances surreptitiously. A 1907 school newspaper story related that a cornfield behind one of the schoolhouses reminded one Navajo pupil of home and that she went into the fields many times to gather the yellow pollen from the tassels for sacred ceremonies.

Parents or relatives gave students certain amulets, effigies, fetishes, or charms that had religious importance, and students brought them to school. Most of these objects were distinctive as Indian religious objects and would have been carefully hidden from school employees. If such items were found by a matron or teacher, they would have been confiscated. We found two clay objects that appear to be miniature representations, one of a bird and the other a four-legged animal. While it is impossible to be sure what these items meant to the pupils who owned them, they may have been effigy representations of clan symbols that provided a sense of security and connection to the customs and traditions of home. The same importance may have been attached to a smoothed nonlocal pebble shaped like a small bone. The Zuni recognize naturally smoothed pebbles that have an animal form as fetishes that are endowed with power. These objects could also have been treated as clan totems by the students.



Possible effigies and a fetish stone found at the Track Site corroborate historical accounts of Indian students practicing traditional beliefs. [LARGER IMAGE (left)] [LARGER IMAGE (right)] (Owen Lindauer)

Our discovery of sherds of historic Indian pottery was surprising, since pottery making was not one of the industrial arts initially taught at the school. Characteristic colors and forms of Southwestern pottery indicate tribal affiliation, and pupils may have brought sherds to school because they reminded them of home. Practice of stoneworking was another way students expressed their home identity and resisted the pressures of assimilation. Obtaining suitable stone was probably difficult, but the school's trash provided materials that could be flaked in the same manner as stone, as the scrapers made out of window glass and

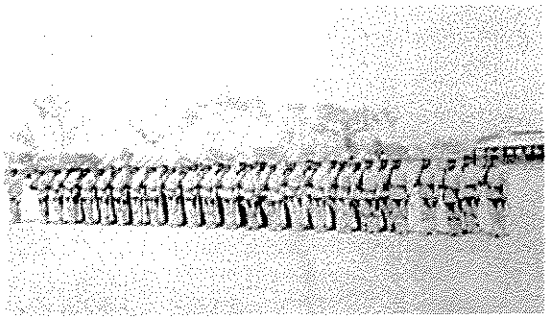
spokeshaves made out of bottle necks that we found demonstrate. The most unusual examples are several bifacially flaked dinner plates that were not used as tools but simply reflect the practice of a traditional skill.

A flaked stone point found at the Track Site attests the continuation of skills learned at home that were outside the school's curriculum. (Owen Lindauer) [LARGER IMAGE]

Federal educational policymakers at the turn of the century hoped that an American identity would come to dominate and eventually replace the pupil's Indian identity. Students would carry the message of civilization back to their tribes. Francis E. Leupp, commissioner of Indian affairs, told Phoenix Indian School graduates in 1900,

Now, in going back, young ladies and gentlemen, to your homes, although you have got a great deal of information to impart, try to impart it modestly. Try to remember that the old people know something too. They have had a certain experience of life which you have not yet had.

The educators thought there were only two outcomes of boarding-school education: total assimilation into American culture or rejection of the educational experience and return to traditional ways. In reality the outcome was much more complex. The goal of the assimilation policy was to remake Indian children into a non-Indians, but the result was educated Indians who incorporated parts of a school-learned American identity with the identity they brought with them from home. At the more than 100 boarding schools established across the nation, many Indian children learned for the first time of the existence of other Indian tribes and the separate, special treatment given to all Indians by the government. More than any other institution, these schools, actively or passively, created the environment that cultivated and strengthened the idea of an Indian identity apart from an individual tribal identity. A story of the Phoenix Indian School's football team is a case in point. It was composed one year of a Navajo defensive line that would allow gaps to form permitting the opponents to tackle their quarterback, a Hopi. But as they lost games, the players came to realize that they must work together in order to win. Teammates Peterson Zah (Navajo) and Ivan Sidney (Hopi) learned such lessons on the school's playing fields. When each of them became leaders of their tribes at a time when compromise and dialogue seemed impossible, they drew on their common school experience and met to work out problems.



Phoenix Indian School Drill Corps
(Courtesy Arizona Historical Foundation)

Arthur C. Parker, a public high school-educated Seneca who later studied anthropology and archaeology under Franz Boaz and Frederick W. Putnam, served in 1935 as the first president of the Society for American Archaeology. He recognized the importance of retaining Indian identity in American society, writing in his *Philosophy of Indian Education* (1916),

Hundreds of Indians have attained honorable positions and are as other Americans, yet they retain their individuality as Indians and in reality are the only Indians who can appreciate the true dignity and value of their race, and they alone are able to speak for it....

Phoenix Indian School was closed in 1990, and today little remains of the federal boarding-school system. In the on-reservation schools, tribal identity is recognized as important and aspects of reinforcing that identity are part of the curricula. Parents can now participate in the education of their children, reinforcing traditions that are such an important part of tribal identity.

Owen Lindauer, director of the Track Site excavations at the Phoenix Indian School, is a historic preservation specialist with the Arizona Department of Transportation.

Further Reading

Dorothy R. Parker, *Phoenix Indian School: The Second Half-century* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996). Paperback, $14.95. ISBN 0-8165-1679-0, provides a history of the school from 1930 until the graduation of its final class of 19 students in 1990.

Robert Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), covers the school's development from its founding until 1935.

Owen Lindauer, *Historical Archaeology of the United States Industrial Indian School at Phoenix: Investigation of a Turn of the Century Trash Dump (Anthropological Field Studies 42)* (Tempe: Office of Cultural Resource Management, Department of Anthropology, Arizona State University, 1996), is a detailed technical report on the Track Site excavations.

Owen Lindauer, *Not for School, but for Life: Lessons from the Historical Archaeology of the Phoenix Indian School (Office of Cultural Resources Management Report 95)* (Tempe: Office of Cultural Resource Management, Department of Anthropology, Arizona State University, 1997), offers a more popular account of the Track Site excavations and interpretation of the finds.

References and Recommended Readings

Pages from Hopi History, Harry C. James

No Turning Back: A Hopi Indian Woman's Struggle to Live in Two Worlds, Polingaysi Qöyawayma, Vada F. Carlson, and Elizabeth Q. White

Me and Mine: The Life Story of Helen Sekaquaptewa, Helen Sekaquaptewa

Sun Chief, Don Talayesva

Bacavi: Journey to Reed Springs, Peter Whiteley

Continuities of Hopi Culture Change, Richard O. Clemmer

Big Falling Snow: A Tewa-Hopi Indian's Life and Times and the History and Traditions of His People, Albert Yava

Roads in the Sky: The Hopi Indians in a Century of Change, (Westview Press, 1995)

Deliberate Acts; Changing Hopi Culture through the Oraibi Split, (University of Arizona Press, 1988)

The Orayvi Split: a Hopi Transformation. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History